

THE CASTLE OF MONTFORT

DOROTHY CRISPINO

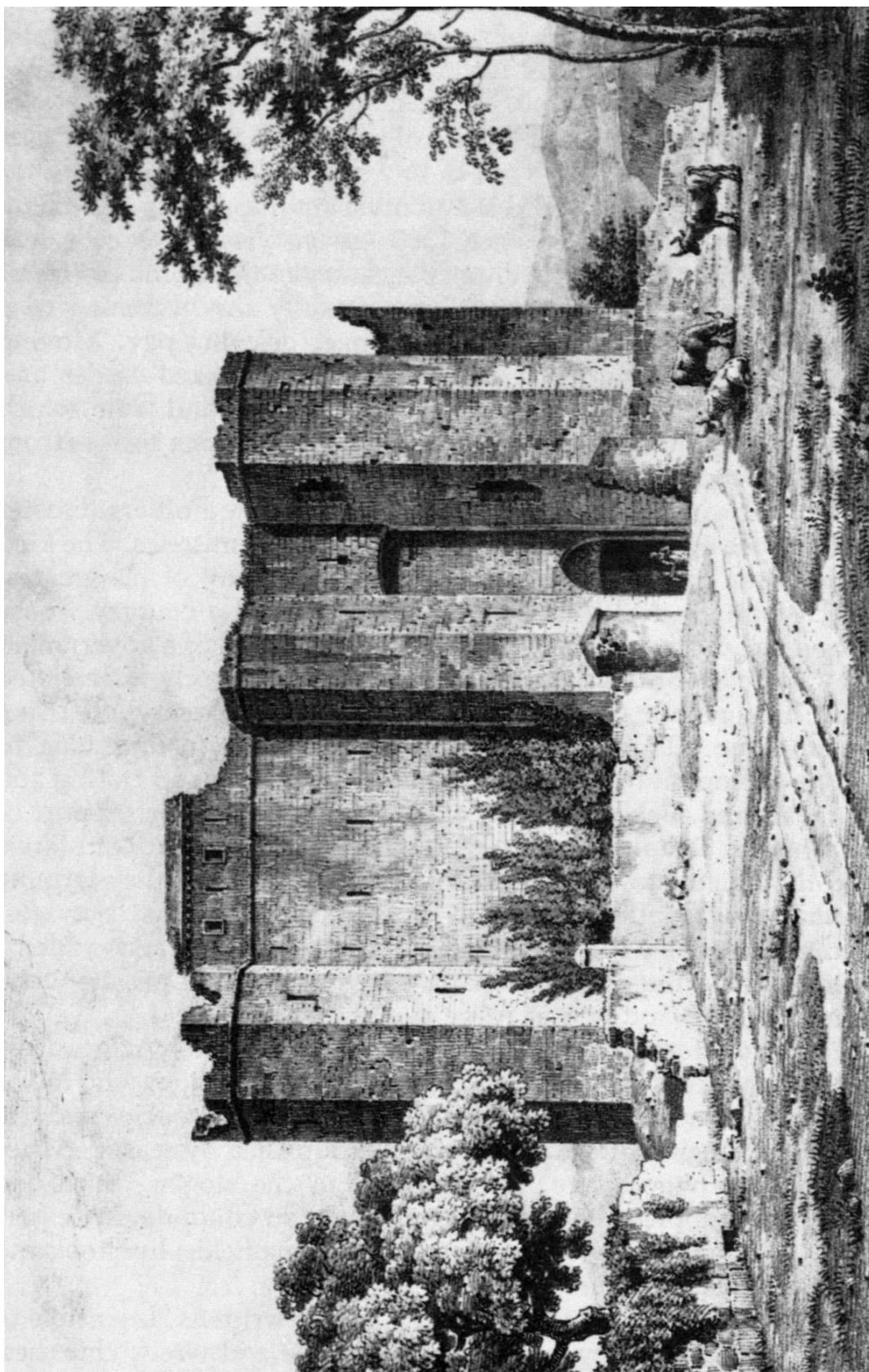
In 1415, Henry V of England led an invasion into France, resuming a war which had lain quiet since 1380—seven years before he was born. If Azincourt provides brilliant pageantry to the legend of "Hank Cinq", for France the military defeat was only the beginning of a devastation of the land by troops no longer drawing pay. Moving systematically southward, these organized bands seized castles and fortresses in which they settled themselves regally, and from which they raided and plundered, fanning out in ever widening sectors from which the operation would be repeated.

Would Azincourt be Poitiers all over again? The Poitiers disaster had left France agonizing under the stabs of untold miseries. The king of France was captive in England, along with many of his greatest lords. His son Charles, a youth of eighteen, faced a country whose spirit and resources were exhausted. He was guardian of a government whose tattered fabric was being ripped apart by loosely interrelated factions: Etienne Marcel and the heavily-taxed merchants were rising and clamoring; King Charles of Navarre arming and intriguing to wrest the regency for himself; the peasants revolting and rioting and being massacred. Beleaguered on all sides and lacking the support of his barons, the Dauphin fled Paris, returning after the death of Marcel spelled the quietus to seditions. From Normandy came the alarming news that Edward III of England had landed at Calais, but after ravaging the country for awhile he left. The nobles of France added a shameful note to the general confusion by flaring up in private wars. No corner of the land was at rest.

But the most fearful peril—as it would be again after Azincourt was from the Free Companies, men of several nationalities who found the periods of truce to be far more profitable than the poorly-paid service under a king's banner. Galloping in groups, led by seasoned captains, their activities were not restricted to the slogan "burn and pillage", but embraced every bestial cruelty man could devise: extortion, bloody slaughter, violating nuns, destroying fields, livestock and villages, desecrating churches...

In a pastoral letter of 1360, Innocent VI had written: "Insensible to the fear of God, the sons of iniquity ... invade and wreck churches, steal their books, chalices, crosses, relics..."¹

Could anything less be expected after Azincourt? People trembled, remembering ... By 1418, Champagne was occupied by the English and their Burgundian allies, and after 1420 the various Companies



Artist's engraving of the ruins of Montfort castle, signed and dated 1819. Collection of the Historical Museum of Montbard.

could plunder with a merry conscience, for the Treaty of Troyes provided the good excuse that they were merely taking possession of territories rightly belonging to their monarch, now that Henry V was heir to the French throne.

Not far from Troyes lay Lirey, a hamlet of fifty hearths, tucked in the fold of a plain where long slow hills gently slope together. The site would seem indefensible, hardly appropriate for a fortress-type castle. In fact it had no castle at all until one was built by Geoffroy de Charny, and it had no church until Geoffroy raised a simple chapel to The Blessed Virgin Mary of the Annunciation, inside the castle moat. A church of wood; flammable. And there was kept a precious relic, the Holy Shroud of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Marguerite de Charny, dame of Lirey, Savoisy and Montfort, granddaughter of Geoffroy, having accomplished her period of mourning for her husband, Jean de Bauffremont, slain at Azincourt, married Humbert de Villersexel, Count of La Roche, sire of Hippolyte-sur-Doubs in the Franche-Comte. And it was to him that the canons of the Lirey church turned in this time of troubles. Fearing for the safety of their treasures and relics, the canons of Lirey entrusted them all to Humbert. On 6 July 1418, the Count gave the canons a receipt:

"For the war which is waging at present and fearing persons of evil intent, we have received from the hands of our beloved chaplains and dean of the chapter of Our Lady of Lirey, the jewels and relics of that church as follows: first of all, a sheet on which is the figure or representation of the Shroud of Our Lord Jesuchrist, which is in a coffer emblazoned with the Charny arms ... Which jewels and relics, for the surety that they be well and securely protected in our castle of Montfort, we have taken and received ... "2

Humbert de Villersexel concludes with the promise to return the treasures to the church "when the tribulation now in France" will have ceased.

The castle of Montfort-en-Auxois, Cote-d'Or, is 6 km. from Mont-bard. One of the most formidable in the region, it must have been considered impregnable in its time, for in mid-XIV century the nearby castle of Genay, belonging to the lords of Montfort, was taken by the English invaders; Chevigny and Montbard were assailed; but no mention has been found of an attempt against Montfort.

Small wonder, to see it from the road ...

Until the beginning of the XIVth century, the barony belonged to the Duke of Burgundy, who gave it in fief. There were several villages, over which the seigneur had all rights of justice. Sometime between 1330 and 1340, the barony passed to Geoffroy de Charny, to whom is attributed the magnificent structure now classified as an historical monument.

The first documentary mention of *Fortis Montis* indicates that the castle was built about 1070; it was enlarged in the XIIth century. The

last reconstruction could be no later than the first half of the XIVth c., for there are no provisions for artillery; the walls are narrowly pierced with slits for arrows. Michel Le Cam writes:³

"To judge by its dimensions, its strength and its position, the construction of such a monument can only be attributed to a very rich and very important seigneur... who could be no other than Geoffroy de Charny who, because of his exceptional standing in the royal court, could very well have erected such a fortress".

Medieval marauders passing along the road below would not have seen the fortress with the same eye with which we look upon its vestiges today. Majestic and strikingly beautiful, the castle glows golden, crowning a rocky promontory formed by the confluence of two rivers. At an altitude of 320 m. and 80 m. above the road, it dominates the verdant countryside, still keeping watch. Now less than twenty souls remain in the few houses which cling to the hillside below the plateau where the castle stands.

The path to the castle begins at a lone, dilapidated farm. It is a long steep climb before one reaches the open plateau, and suddenly, at the far end, one is—no, not greeted, but accosted—by a startling presence from the past. The spirit of this place has not capitulated but, resentful of the intrusion into its brooding solitude, throws a veil of defiant intimidation over the mutilated walls.

A momentary shock ... but one must be sensible and go forward.

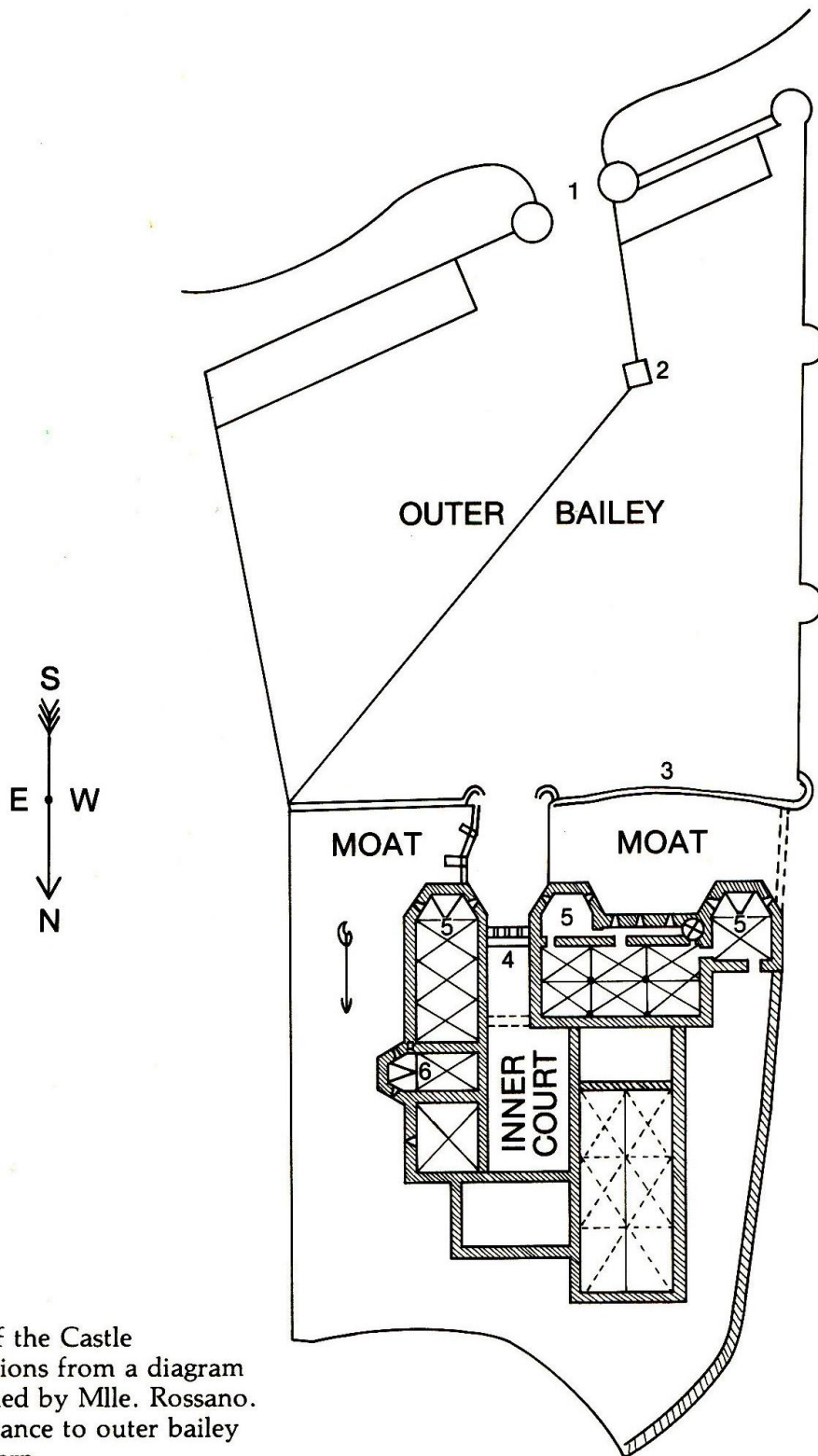
Once a wide ditch, cut in the rock, was framed by a towered wall enclosing the vast outer bailey, with its stables, granges, barracks. At the foot of the castle itself was a moat 15 m. wide, now filled with fallen stones all enmeshed in rampant vegetation.

That imposing facade is now all that remains. Behind it, emptiness. The earth is uneven over debris tangled in brambles. For after the Revolution, the castle was sold to a private citizen who leased it as a stone quarry.

But on the inside wall where the floors were torn away, one can see that this was a veritable palace, four stories high. Archeologists of Montbard⁴ have shown the castle to have been of a rare construction. The curtain was the same height as the three front towers, giving the continuous horizontal line which contributed so much to the impression of inviolable solidity. The practical advantage was that it allowed the defenders to move rapidly from one point to another without time lost in running down stairs and up in some other place. The roof was flat, paved with tiles; one of the few terrace-castles in France.

The towers—neither round nor square but hexagonal—rise 30 m. into the air; their roots plunge to the very depths of the moat. The whole so well designed and admirably constructed for defense that there was no need for a keep.

The Bill of Sale of 1783 describes the edifice, still intact, in some detail. Excavations have not yet gone so far, but according to this document there was a basement with cisterns, wine cellars and wine



Plan of the Castle

Indications from a diagram
furnished by Mlle. Rossano.

1. Entrance to outer bailey
2. Cistern
3. Rampart in front of counterscarp
4. Entrance to castle
5. Towers
6. Probably the chapel, on the floor of the living quarters.

press, bakeries, kitchens, vast storage rooms ... all connected by vaulted galleries.

And there was a treasury-room.

We know that for many years the Shroud was in the Franche-Comte. But was it ever locked away in the subterranean treasury of Montfort? Was it hidden here, perhaps "for about 34 years" after the death of Geoffroy de Charny? And did Humbert de Villersexel and Marguerite de Charny take the Shroud to their castle of Montfort in 1418, an intention stated in the receipt?

Unless by some miraculous discovery, the answer will not be found in these ruins. Montfort passed into the House of Bauffremont through Pierre, nephew of Marguerite's first husband. Pierre's descendants, including the Prince of Orange, the Count of Nassau and Frederic Casimir, prince palatin of Landsberg, held it until the end of the XVIIth c., at which time the castle chapel was used for Protestant services. Extensive repairs were made in the first years of the XVIIIth c., after the castle had been unoccupied for three decades. And finally, the citizen of Semur demolished the edifice bit by bit. Only a few of the tiles and decorations (a few stone angel-heads) have been recovered, the rest having been dispersed and destroyed by the sale of the building blocks.

Villagers round about have no memory of the presence of a Shroud. The septuagenarian farmer who lived at the bottom of the ascent had never heard of the Shroud, though he not only recounted many stories and legends about the castle, but had in his possession a sheaf of XIXth c. papers, a history of the castle and its seigneurs,⁵ which he knew almost by heart. He told me proudly that his ancestors had lived on this land and served its lords ever since the castle was first built. "Since the XIth century?" I asked, incredulous. He grinned widely. "Since always!" he affirmed.

We will probably never know if the Shroud ever found refuge at Montfort. But our interest in the castle is no less real, for it is another accession to our dossier on Geoffroy de Charny.

NOTES

1. As quoted by Barbara Tuchman: *A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous 14th Century*, Knopf, New York 1978, pg. 224.
2. André Perret: "Essai sur l'histoire du Saint Suaire du XIV^e au XVI^e siècle", *Memoires de l'Academie des Sciences Belles-Lettres et Arts de Savoie*, 1960.
3. Michel Le Cam: *Montfort (en Auxois) et ses Seigneurs: un "Château à Terrasse" du XIV^e Siecle en Bourgogne*, 1970.
4. "Les Amis de la Cité de Montbard", under the direction of Mlle. Huguette Rossano.
5. These papers, copied and very briefly published by Courtépée, are in large part unreliable, except for the church entries between 1769 & 1788.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My deepest gratitude goes to Mlle. Rossano; the *Syndicat d'Initiative* of Montbard; and Dr. Jean Richard, professor of history at the University of Dijon, for their generous assistance.